

# *Truth for Today*

## **The Bible Explained**

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## **Easter Message Believed - Thomas, John 20:28-29**

*[The English Standard version of the Scriptures has been used unless otherwise stated.]*

We come today then to the third and final instalment of this year's Easter series, simply entitled "Believed." We're going to look at events recorded by John in his gospel, and I'm now going to read verses 24 to 29 from John's gospel chapter 20.

"Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "we have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe."

"Eight days later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Because of this story, the apostle Thomas has been given the nickname "doubting Thomas" and the expression "a doubting Thomas," like so many expressions which have their origin in the Bible, has passed into general English usage. And that's actually rather sad, because, as far as we are concerned today, he's not doubting Thomas. He's believing Thomas! That's certainly what he was by the end of the story, and often, as far as spiritual matters are concerned, it's the end that counts.

We can view this story as being about a personal journey, from doubting to believing. Thomas made that journey, and we must each make it too. But what also shines through in it is the condescending grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, it seems, paid that second visit to the disciples purely for the sake of Thomas. And thirdly it is about the heartfelt confession which the experience provoked from the chastened soul of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!"

We might say then that it's about the conversion, the condescension and the confession. But before we look at those three things, there is something which dominates the entire situation, something overwhelmingly important - which demands our attention first.

### **Christ is risen!**

There is an enormous historical event which is the background to the story, and which also totally overshadows the story. So if we were to ignore it and just move on to consider the story itself, we

would miss the whole point. The event I'm talking about of course is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those people in our world today (of whom there are many) who would like to 'debunk' the miracles recorded in the Bible, sometimes put out the idea that the people who lived in Bible times were much more superstitious and gullible than we are today, and were therefore much more ready to believe that something miraculous had happened than we would be, if given the same evidence.

But I think the repeated accounts in the gospels of how the disciples reacted to the discovery of the empty tomb, and to the various post resurrection appearances of the Lord Jesus, argue against that. Thomas of course is a good example of this. It seems to me that folks in those days knew, just as well as we do, that people die but they don't normally come back to life again. The reason that the early church quickly came to believe that Christ had risen from the dead, literally and physically, was that the evidence for it was overwhelming.

In the months and years following these events, the young church was going to grow and multiply at breakneck speed, and it was primarily for one reason. A short walk down the road from the centre of Jerusalem, where the gospel was first preached, there stood an empty tomb. Everyone in Jerusalem knew that the body of Jesus had been taken down from the cross and buried in that tomb, that a heavy stone had been rolled across the entrance and that guards were keeping watch over it. And what they also knew was that the tomb had been empty since very early on that first Easter morning.

And that's why, if you lived in those days, you were faced with a very stark choice as to what you believed about it. None of the fanciful ideas which have been dreamt up in more recent times in efforts to explain away the evidence of the Lord's resurrection would have held any water then. The facts were too well known. In those days you either believed that "the Lord is risen indeed," and threw in your lot with the new movement, or else you believed the only alternative, and the only alternative was that the whole thing was a sordid hoax, perpetrated by a gang of rogues who had managed somehow to sneak past the guards in the dead of night, remove the body from the tomb and then either hide it or dispose of it so successfully that the authorities were unable to find any trace of it. It was one or the other. The fence was far too sharp for anyone to sit on it.

Once we appreciate that this was the reality of the situation at the time, it gives us a huge insight, I believe, into the events that led up to the conversion of Paul, and in particular into what the risen Lord meant, on that momentous day on the road to Damascus, when He said to Paul: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

What **did** He mean by that? It all came down to what Paul believed about the events of that first Easter morning. There was Paul, an immensely intelligent man, and a fanatically religious Jew. As a devoutly religious Jew, he had of course swallowed without question the "party line" and had embarked on his ruthless programme of hunting down every Christian he could find, in order to, as he saw it, rid the nation of the scourge of this despicable deception which was Christianity. Paul believed he was rounding up a gang of brazen fraudsters. And yet, as he pursued this course, the way the Christians behaved began to sound a warning bell in his mind.

Day after day, he encountered these people who went cheerfully to prison or to death. He saw their radiant faces and heard their consistent testimonies, and all the time an inner voice was telling him that something was wrong. This just didn't stack up. These were not the kind of people to be party to such a despicable hoax. And that contradiction, between the position he maintained in his mind and the reality he witnessed day by day, grew more and more intense until at last the dam burst, and as he fell to the earth just outside Damascus, in the presence of the Lord Himself, the scales finally dropped from his eyes and everything fell into place. He saw that his entire position had been based on a false premise. He had been on the wrong side all this time and it was, after all, the Christians who were right!

Whilst Paul's conversion was the most dramatic and the most famous, in those days and years there were many thousands of conversions as people from all walks of life came from an initial position of scepticism to the unshakeable conviction that, as Paul says in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15 verse 4, "on the third day He rose from the dead in accordance with the scriptures."

Today, as we look in detail at these verses in John chapter 20, taking us back to the earliest days when this was starting to happen, we trace that wonderful change in the experience of one the Lord's original 12 disciples.

## **The conversion**

Let us then try to follow the story from the point of view of Thomas. We don't know why he wasn't there on the first occasion when the Lord appeared to the disciples. But I rather suspect that after this he made sure that he wasn't absent again when the other disciples were together. In the incident John records immediately after this one, in chapter 21, I can't help noticing that Thomas is specifically mentioned as one of the disciples who were there.

The first visit, when Thomas was absent, took place on the very day of the resurrection. This would be before the full reality of what had happened, and before the fact of the empty tomb, had really sunk in. I strongly suspect that before the second occasion, which, as we read, was 8 days later, Thomas would have come to terms with the facts and would no longer need any convincing.

As I see it, the second visit was purely for the benefit of Thomas, but not - I suggest - because he any longer needed the physical evidence he had demanded. When the Lord said "Put your finger here...." and so on, there's no suggestion that Thomas any longer saw any reason to take up the offer. The Lord made that visit in order to speak to the heart of Thomas, to rebuke him for his unbelief, to call forth his repentance for it, and to draw from his heart that glorious confession.

At the first visit, Thomas had missed what the others had experienced, and then they came to him and told him what they had seen and heard. Thomas, in fact, was informed about the Lord's resurrection in just the same way as everyone hears about it today, by being told by someone else.

When you really think it through, Thomas's adamant refusal to take his friends' word for it when they assure him that they have seen the Lord is really quite serious. This was highly corroborated evidence he was hearing, and he was hearing it from several of his closest and most trusted associates. By implication, he was writing off his fellow disciples as either fools or liars, preferring to base everything on the direct evidence of his own senses, no matter what reliable witnesses told him.

I do wonder though if Thomas was really being a hard headed rationalist here, as we might naturally assume from his attitude. We all think we are being totally objective when we decide whether or not we believe something, but in reality the decision often has more to do with the heart than the head. There is one earlier report about Thomas which may just give us a clue about how his mind worked. It's in chapter 11 when Jesus tells the disciples that He is going to the grave of Lazarus. Thomas's take on hearing this is to say "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." This suggests perhaps that Thomas conformed to the well known definition of a pessimist - someone who is only happy when they are miserable. Was he in fact someone who was always expecting, indeed almost desiring, to hear bad news, and for whom therefore the mind-blowingly good news that the Lord Jesus had conquered death and burst forth from the tomb was just too much to take?

Later New Testament teaching indicates that a special significance attaches to belief in the resurrection. One of the New Testament answers to the question “How can I be saved?” is found in Romans chapter 10 verse 9. There the promise is that we will be saved if we (1) confess Jesus as Lord and (2) believe **in our heart** that God raised Him from the dead. What does believing in the heart mean? Surely it must be more than just mentally agreeing to the fact. I think it’s when we shout for joy, as it were, and say “Yes!!! Praise God it’s true! Christ is risen!” This I believe is the step of faith from which Thomas, when his friends confronted him on the resurrection day, shrank back, preferring to remain in his disbelieving cynicism.

I wonder also if the seemingly quite contentious outburst from Thomas, ending in the defiant “I will never believe,” just might have something to do with annoyance with himself for not being there when the Lord came the first time. Were the reasons for that absence possibly ones he was less than proud of? I am of course only speculating, as I am when I suggest that by the time of the second visit Thomas no longer needed convincing. The Lord’s words “Have you believed because you have seen Me?” would suggest, if taken literally, that my speculation is wrong, but I see those words rather as rhetorical. The Lord came back for Thomas, I suggest, not in order to comply with his demand for evidence, but to chide him for his feeble faith, to expose the folly of his posturing and to convey to him the exhaustless ocean of His love, so that Thomas, overwhelmed with the reality of those things, would indeed respond as he so gloriously did.

There’s a verse of a hymn which expresses this better than I can. It runs like this:

“Oh teach us, Lord, Thy searchless love to know,  
Thou, who hast died.  
Before our feeble faith, Lord Jesus, show  
Thy hands and side.  
That our glad hearts, responsive unto Thine,  
May wake with all the power of love divine.”

J Boyd (1851-1936)

### **The condescension**

So far, then, we have thought a little about Thomas, and what I have referred to as his conversion, from the brash outburst of “I will never believe” to the glad surrender of “my Lord and my God.” But the Bible is full of Christ, and if rightly understood, it will always point us to Him. So what I believe shines supremely from this incident is what I have called the condescending grace of the Lord Jesus.

One of the mysteries that will often confront us as we study the word of God, and try to appreciate the ways of God, is a question which arises in connection with this incident. We could ask ourselves “Would it have been better if Thomas had believed what his friends told him in the first place?” The answer is, of course, yes in one sense, and yet no in another. Did not the Lord say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed?” Yes, He did, so Thomas undoubtedly missed out on that blessing. He threw away his opportunity to be perhaps the first person in history to know what it was to “believe in his heart that God had raised Him from the dead” by putting simple faith in the message someone else had brought to him. And yet the miracle of grace will always be beyond us, the miracle whereby God somehow patiently and with infinite wisdom works through our failures and our disobedience, turning them to good account and to the praise of His glory. So it is here. That stooping, that condescension that the Lord demonstrated to Thomas on that day must have touched his heart more than would ever have been possible, were it not for his initial obstinacy.

This incident is also an example of something we see time and time again in the life of the Lord Jesus. He always had time for one individual! He takes a detour through Samaria in John chapter 4 in order to touch the heart of that one woman at the wellside.<sup>1</sup> He stops off on his urgent journey

to see the dying daughter of the synagogue ruler Jairus, because a needy woman has touched the hem of His garment. And here He singles out for special care and attention, not one who has distinguished himself by his faith or devotion, but one who has distinguished himself by his failure. Surely this calls for our worship! This is the Great Shepherd of the sheep going about His work!

## **The confession**

We've looked then at the conversion of Thomas, and at the condescension, the wonderful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now in conclusion let's consider that glorious confession that Thomas made. I referred earlier to the wonderful promise of Romans chapter 10 verse 9. There salvation is promised to all who confess Jesus as Lord, and believe in the heart that God raised Him from the dead. Just as there is a special significance attached to belief from the heart in the reality of the resurrection, so also there is a special significance to the confession that He is Lord. Both are proof of a spiritual work in the soul, something wrought by the Spirit of God. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 12 verse 3, Paul makes the remarkable statement that it is not possible for anyone to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, unless the Holy Spirit is at work in their soul.

This response of Thomas to the searching words of the Lord Jesus constitutes the exact compliance, if we can use that expression, with the terms of Romans 10 verse 9. Did he confess with his mouth Jesus as Lord? Most assuredly so. Did he believe in his heart that God had raised Him from the dead? Surely there can be no doubt about that either.

Thomas not only confessed Jesus as Lord, he also acknowledged that He was God. It is hard for us to imagine what it was like for the disciples, spending every day, as they had for three and a half years, with this remarkable Man, and frequently seeing and hearing things which proclaimed Him to be none other than God Himself. The apostle John, it seems clear from his writings, was to ponder long and hard about this great mystery. But for Thomas, it seems, this was a flash of immediate insight – “my Lord and my God!” I referred to this experience as Thomas's conversion. A conversion means a 180 degree turn, and this is indeed what has happened to Thomas. His confidence in himself is now behind him; he now has his eye on Christ. It is now Christ who fills his vision.

For various reasons, some of which I have speculated about, it was, I believe, a bitter and unhappy Thomas who threw down the gauntlet on that first occasion. But there is no bitterness at the end of the story. There is only joy and wonder. I'm sure that his brow was no longer furrowed and that there was now a brighter tone to his voice. He was indeed no longer worthy of the nickname of doubting Thomas. He had felt the touch of the Master's hand!

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk entitled "Believed" in our Easter message series talk number T1141.

1. Speaker's correction: At the time of recording the talk I believed that it was actually a detour for the Lord to go via Samaria, but subsequently I've come to understand that it was in fact the most direct route. The point is that it was common for religious Jews to use a different route specifically to avoid going through Samaria, but the Lord ignored the convention.

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### **Please Note:**

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